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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to catalog the nature of written message exchanges on a network computer bulletin board, HSJOURN, which caters mainly to high school journalism teachers and publications advisers. The study analyzed the content of messages between December 1993 and January 1995 and cataloged them in the following categories: announcements; chatting; does anybody know?; ethical matters; conducting conferences; editorial guidance; consumer information; legal matters; trading classroom material; expression of opinion; reprints from mass media; sharing problems or solutions; sharing teacher tips; maintenance; and other. A tabulation of the number of messages falling into each category shows that most message activity occurred in 3 categories: announcements, chats, and does anybody know? Another tabulation shows that October was the most active month on the bulletin board and August was the least active. Activity was fairly consistent over the 7 days of the week. Other tables show: (1) the frequency of messages by classification of poster; (2) the classification of original message leavers versus those who reply; and (3) the frequency of messages posted by individuals. The research did not intend to provide statistically significant analysis but rather to serve as a descriptive snapshot of activity on this bulletin board at a particular time for purposes of later comparison and research. (Contains seven tables of data.) (TB)

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Use of an Electronic Discussion Group for High School Publications Advisers: A Descriptive Pilot Study

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Literature Review

Computers have often provided avenues of communication for people in various walks of life. In their early incarnations, computers were available only to experts who could set up their own software and hardware to enable contact with other experts via telephone lines and modems.

However, the scope and potential of computer-aided communication expanded greatly as large computer networks were established across the United States. The first such network was ARPANET, which was started in the late 1960s (Sproull and Kiesler 1991, 116).

Although the intended purpose for ARPANET was to enhance research by allowing access to remote computers, Sproull and Kiesler (1991, 118) found that "electronic mail rapidly became one of the most popular features of the ARPANET." They cited the formation of "A network community ... filled with friends and collaborators who rarely, if ever, met in person" (Sproull and Kiesler 1991, 118). In fact, their research (1991, 122) indicated that at one company "fewer than 15 percent of the people who answer a question are personally acquainted with the questioner or are even located in the same city."

Ogan (1993, 192) echoed that thought when she wrote that the electronic bulletin board "connected people to one another in a new social community defined around the interests of its members and not their physical proximity."

In 1983, Bitnet ("Because It's Time Network") was formed at the City University of New York. (Akst, 1995, 42). It provided another platform providing for electronic linking of people with common interests.

The Internet, successor to ARPANET and contemporary of Bitnet, has continued and expanded the communication function with E-mail being "one of the most popular features" (Sproull and Kiesler 1991, 118).

Consideration of some characteristics of electronic mail makes its advantages clear. Sproull and Kiesler (1991, 116) noted: "Networks can make time stand still. Electronic messages can be held indefinitely in computer memory. People can read or reread their messages at any time, copy them, change them or forward them."

In addition, Ogan (1993, 190) pointed out, "On the personal level, the bulletin board provides users with a better social understanding of community, nation and world with the increased information available about events and processes on all three levels." She added, "Networks also help groups organize for action" (191).

Thus, electronic mail by its nature possesses a combination of advantages offered by no other form of communication. But perhaps its greatest advantage lies outside the technical matters just cited. That advantage is the ability to literally network, around the world, people with a common interest.

Like the people who use them, electronic discussion groups come in all shapes and sizes with all sorts of purposes. Here are some examples.

Professional meetings — Hewlett-Packard engineers, who meet in person only once a year, use E-mail networks to conduct "ongoing meetings in which they can frequently and routinely discuss professional and company issues" (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991, 121).

Support groups — People who work with specialized health and medical problems have developed electronic support groups in which "[N]urses and other health professionals ... elicit and receive support during stressful situations" (Sparks, 1992, 62).

Enhancements to teaching — A news brief in *Chemical & Engineering News* (1992, 18) reported on an electronic bulletin board system (BBS) for science teachers and students. According to the report, "Students and teachers can call and use their computers

to ask science questions, share teaching tips, trade classroom materials, hold or participate in conferences, or just chat on-line." It went on to list additional services from which teachers could benefit.

Business matters — *Publishers Weekly* reported on a new BBS related to sales of books. The system would have four distinct areas, called "rooms." Their functions were as follows: "[O]ne room allows booksellers to talk to each other; another features posted book jackets with short reviews; the third room houses publicity materials about recent or upcoming events (updated daily); and another is for sales reps to leave messages for their customers." (1994, 18)

Dispensing of information from a central source — *American City & County* related the increasing reliance of governments on disseminating information electronically: "More and more local governments are electronically reaching out and touching residents, and all the digital road signs point to this cyberspace trend continuing" (Noack, 1994, 40).

The growth of Bitnet in the 1980s and the Internet in the 1990s has been accompanied by a proliferation of electronic discussion groups (mailing lists). Their popularity accelerated when commercial on-line services, such as CompuServe and America Online began providing Internet access to their subscribers.

Topics covered in such discussion groups are nearly as diverse as the people who subscribe to them. Akst (1995, 42) commented, "In fact, given that there are at least 6,000 mailing lists in all, there's likely to be a mailing list for just about everyone."

Background of the Current Study

High school journalism teachers and publications advisers share some characteristics with the groups of people mentioned heretofore. (For simplicity of wording, throughout the rest of this paper "advisers" will be used to refer to people in both categories; most people who teach scholastic journalism also advise at least one publication.) They are professionals, and many of them have few chances to interact

personally with other advisers. Working with students on publications is likely to bring about problems (language, coverage of controversial topics, access to information, etc.) that could call for the help of a support group.

Many advisers might seek help with aspects of teaching their students the fine points of producing a high school publication, and many might seek information about products or services that would benefit them, their students and their programs.

With this background in mind, the author undertook a study of HSJOURN, an electronic discussion group designed for advisers.

Brief History of HSJOURN

HSJOURN began operation in late November 1993. The discussion group is headquartered on the campus of Louisiana Tech University, where HSJOURN is operated by Listserv server software running on the university's mainframe computer.

Although the list was established primarily to serve advisers in high school settings, its membership is open to anyone who would like to participate. Some college journalism teachers and publications advisers are also members of the group.

Because of the nature of open electronic discussion groups, an exact breakdown of membership by categories is impossible to obtain. To join, a person has only to send to the server the E-mail message "subscribe HSJOURN" followed by first and last names (which could even be pseudonyms). The server records the names sent and the sender's E-mail address (which it obtains automatically from the message).

A membership list, which may be obtained by E-mail at any time, shows only each subscriber's E-mail address and the name under which he or she subscribed. Any additional information must be obtained from messages posted on the list.

Because of the ease with which one may join the list or leave it (which is equally easy to do), membership fluctuates. Checks made at irregular intervals indicated that the

number of subscribers hovered around 100. At last check when this paper was being prepared the number was 134.

Methodology

Content analysis was used to determine the kinds of communication posted on HSJOURN by its subscribers.

The unit of analysis was the entire message. The time frame used was December 1993 through January 1995, which covered the first 14 full months of HSJOURN's operation.

Categories of content

Probably because of the relative newness of this specialized form of communication, review of previous research revealed a limited number of categories used for this type of study. They were as follows:

•The "Does anybody know ...? message" cited by Sproull and Kiesler (1991, 121). They call this type of message "an electronic request for information ..."

•Reprints of material from mass media (Ogan, 1993, 185).

•Expressions of the writer's opinion, which Ogan (1993, 186) called "editorials and op-ed pieces ... letters to the editor ... and responses to those letters."

•Consumer information (Ogan, 1993, 186).

•Editorial guidance to other writers (Ogan, 1993, 186).

•Sharing teaching tips (*Chemical & Engineering News*, 1992, 18)

•Trading classroom materials (*Chemical & Engineering News*, 1992, 18)

•Conducting conferences (*Chemical & Engineering News*, 1992, 18)

•Chatting (*Chemical & Engineering News*, 1992, 18)

•Announcements of activities (*Chemical & Engineering News*, 1992, 18)

•Talking with "experts in their field" (Sparks, 1992, 62)

•Sharing "problems, solutions, miracles and miseries" (Sparks, 1992, 62).

Some refinements were made in the categories based on the author's observations of the messages being studied and on the fact that the focus of HSJOURN differed from that of any of the studies cited. The final categories, as they were used in the current content analysis, were as follows:

Announcements — notices of activities or events

Chatting — comments directed primarily to (and primarily of interest to) one person or a few people rather than to the entire group

Does anybody know ... ? — questions or comments seeking a response from the group at large

Ethical matters — questions or comments concerning ethical questions related to scholastic journalism

Conducting conferences — use of the group to confer on matters not covered in another category

Editorial guidance to other writers — comments to subscribers about their procedures in composing messages, posting messages, or both

Consumer information — information about purchasing material, including suggestions about what material (such as computer hardware and software) might be best in certain situations

Legal matters — questions or comments concerning legal topics related to scholastic journalism

Trading classroom materials — offering items for use in classroom teaching situations

Expressions of the writer's opinion — personal thoughts on any topics other than consumer information

Talking with "experts in their field" — seeking help from individuals with expertise in particular areas

Reprints — reproduction of material from mass media or from other sources on the Internet

Sharing "problems, solutions, miracles and miseries" — seeking help with difficulties or providing help to people with difficulties (including computer software and hardware)

Sharing teaching tips — providing ideas on how best to teach specific concepts or techniques

Maintenance — messages (such as requests to subscribe or unsubscribe) concerned primarily with operation of the list rather than with scholastic journalism

Other — topics not covered in any of the preceding categories.

Categories were considered mutually exclusive, so that no single message was coded into more than one category. If a message had elements of more than one category, it was placed in whichever category was deemed dominant in that message.

Original message or response

As a result of the nature of a discussion group, some messages are posted to begin a discussion or ask a question about a particular topic while other messages respond to what someone had posted previously. Thus each message was classified as an original message or a response.

Classification of poster

As noted on page 4, subscribers cannot be readily identified other than through the content of their messages. Thus, people who posted messages were classified into one of four categories according to how they identified themselves in their messages if they provided identification beyond their names. Those classifications were as follows:

- affiliated with a college or university
- affiliated with a high school or junior high school
- other
- could not be determined from the message.

Other areas of analysis included

- the individual posting a message (as indicated by the person's user identification)
- the day of the week on which the message was posted
- the time of the posting
- the month of the posting
- the year of the posting.

Results

Four categories of content failed to appear at all in the messages. They were as follows: conducting conferences, editorial guidance to other writers, talking with "experts in their field" and trading classroom materials.

Tabulation of the categories that appeared produced the results shown below.

Table 1

Contents of Messages by Original/Reply Status

Category	Original	Reply	Total
Announcements	60	3	63
Chatting	11	86	97
Does anybody know?	53	2	55
Ethical matters	1	5	6
Consumer information	3	14	17
Legal matters	2	3	5
Trading classroom material	9	7	16
Expressions of the writer's opinion	1	8	9
Reprints from mass media	10	0	10
Sharing problems, solutions, etc.	1	8	9
Sharing teaching tips	0	1	1
Maintenance	1	2	3
Other	7	8	15
Totals	159	147	306

N=306

Table 1 indicates that the bulk of the messages studied during this period fell into one of three categories. Announcements, chats and "Does anybody know?" questions together made up more than two-thirds of all messages posted with totals of 63, 97 and 55, respectively.

Moreover, although the total group of messages is fairly evenly distributed between originals and replies with 159 and 147 respectively, differences are evident in individual categories — most evident in the three just mentioned. As one might expect,

most announcements and most "Does anybody know?" messages were original posts. On the other hand, most chatting messages were replies to previous posts, which again might be expected.

Table 2

Frequency of Messages by Months

Month	Messages	Percent
December 1993	20	6.5
January 1994	19	6.2
February 1994	45	14.7
March 1994	33	10.8
April 1994	5	1.6
May 1994	18	5.9
June 1994	7	2.3
July 1994	12	3.9
August 1994	4	1.3
September 1994	16	5.2
October 1994	68	22.2
November 1994	25	8.2
December 1994	12	3.9
January 1995	22	7.2
Totals	306	99.9

As Table 2 indicates, activity in the discussion group varied widely during the 14 months of the study and showed no apparent pattern. Volume reached a low in August, when only four messages were posted, and hit a high in October with 68 — almost one-fourth of the total number of messages examined in the study.

Table 3

Frequency of Messages by Days of the Week

Day	Messages	Percent
Monday	40	13.1
Tuesday	49	16.0
Wednesday	48	15.7
Thursday	66	21.6
Friday	59	19.3
Saturday	13	4.2
Sunday	31	10.1
Totals	306	100

Except for Saturdays and Sundays, activity on the list was spread fairly evenly throughout the week. Most subscribers apparently took time off from HSJOURN while they were away from schools and their classes. Interestingly, the most *and* least active days were clustered around the weekend as Thursday and Friday accounted for more than 40 percent of the messages while Saturday and Sunday combined had just over 14 percent.

Table 4

Contents of Messages by Months

Category	Dec 93	Jan 94	Feb 94	Mar 94	Apr 94	May 94	June 94	July 94	Aug 94	Sept 94	Oct 94	Nov 94	Dec 94	Jan 95	Tot.
Announcements	3	3	13	6	1	7	3	4	0	4	11	3	3	2	63
Chatting	6	3	10	9	2	5	1	3	0	2	25	16	3	12	97
DAK?	1	4	10	5	1	2	0	2	0	2	15	5	2	6	55
Ethical matters	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	6
Consumer info.	3	3	4	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	17
Legal matters	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	5
Trad. material	2	1	1	1	0	3	1	1	4	2	0	0	0	0	16
Writer's opinion	1	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	9
Reprints	0	0	1	6	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
Shar. problems	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	9
Shar. teach. tips	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Maintenance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	3
Other	0	4	2	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	2	1	1	2	15
Totals	20	19	45	33	5	18	7	12	4	16	68	25	12	22	306

N=306

Although numbers of messages in various categories varied slightly by months, patterns within each month seem to be fairly similar across the 14 months of the study.

Table 5

Frequency of Messages by Classification of Poster

Classification	Number	Percent
Not determined	69	22.5
Affiliated with a high school or junior high	128	41.8
Affiliated with a college or university	98	32.0
Other	11	3.6
Totals	N=306	99.9

As was mentioned earlier, each poster's classification was determined from the content of his or her message. Some messages contained a reference such as "I'm a newspaper adviser at John F. Kennedy High School." In other cases, a person's signature (Internet terminology for a standard closing appended to every E-mail message) contained a line such as "Associate Professor of Journalism, State University." When either of the above was found for a person, that classification was applied to all messages posted by the him or her. Posters of messages whose content made it clear that the poster was affiliated with neither level of educational institution were classified as "other." All remaining posters were classified "unknown."

Table 5 indicates that people affiliated with high schools and junior high schools posted the largest single group of messages (128 of the total of 306). College- and university-affiliated people posted almost one-third of the total (98 of 306). It would appear that secondary-education-level journalism educators (those for whom the list was established) make the most use of it. However, the large percentage (almost one-fourth) of messages from posters of unknown classification makes drawing conclusions difficult.

Table 6

Frequency of Classification by Original/Reply Status

Classification	Original	Reply	Total
Not determined	28	41	69
Affiliated with a high school or junior high	58	70	128
Affiliated with a college or university	63	35	98
Other	10	1	11
Totals	159	147	306

Table 6 indicates that original messages dominated (at an almost two-to-one ration) among those posted by people affiliated with a college or university, while people at the secondary-education level posted slightly more replies than original messages. As was true with Table 5, however, the large number of posters of unknown classification makes drawing conclusions difficult.

One explanation for the differences in the groups might be that people at the high school level are likely to respond to requests for advice regarding staff problems, financial difficulties, use of certain kinds of computer software, etc. College- and university-affiliated people, on the other hand, might be more likely to post announcements of workshops, conferences and services available on the Internet.

Table 7

Frequency of Messages Posted by Individuals

Messages from One Individual	Number	Percent
1-5	87	87.9
6-10	6	6.1
11-15	4	4.0
16-20	0	0
21-25	0	0
26-30	1	1.0
31-35	0	0
36-40	1	1.0
Totals	99	100

With few exceptions, as Table 7 indicates, messages posted to the group by any one individual were limited. Only about one person in eight (12.1 percent) posted more than five messages to HSJOURN during the 14 months studied. Although the table is broken down only in units of five, further analysis showed the mode here to be a single message. Fifty-five people fell in this group. It might also be noted that the one subscriber in the highest category was the list manager, some of whose messages were announcements that might not come from a typical subscriber.

It should also be noted that the total number of people (99) posting messages is less than the number of subscribers to the group. Although it might be useful to include here the number of people who posted no messages, that number cannot be ascertained. Since individuals can join and leave HSJOURN at will, no method exists to determine the total number of people who subscribed to the group during the period under

consideration. Because that total cannot be determined, it is impossible to subtract 99 from it to calculate the number of non-posters ("lurkers" in discussion group parlance).

Analysis and Recommendations for Further Study

This research was not intended to provide statistically significant analysis. Rather, it was planned to serve as a descriptive snapshot of the first 14 months of HSJOURN's existence. The author's hope is that the information provided here will serve as a baseline for comparison with data from research in this area in the future.

With that thought in mind, here are some reactions to the data and some suggestions for future research.

Variations in activity by months

Volume of messages varied widely in the 14 months studied. The busiest month, October, had 22.2 percent of all messages in the study, while August was at the other extreme with 1.3 percent. Summer vacations might account for the latter, but what about the 1.6 percent in April (the next-lowest month)?

Future research might focus on why advisers use HSJOURN more in some months than in others.

Variations in activity by individuals

Posting of messages varies from individual to individual. Some post messages frequently; others post rarely. What causes the variation? Although this study did not concentrate on that topic, it could be a useful approach for additional research.

Announcements

This category had the second-highest number of messages. Examples were posting of information about upcoming workshops and conferences and announcements of on-line newspapers available via gopher server.

Some questions to consider for future research are as follows: (a) What is the impact of announcements posted on an E-mail discussion group? (b) Are advisers more

likely or less likely to pay attention to them than to the same announcements in printed form, such as a direct-mail flier or a notice in a newsletter?

Chatting

Messages that are primarily directed to one or two people were posted to the entire group 97 times — the highest total of any single category. Their content was frequently of the "Glad to hear from you" type or a "Here's so-and-so's E-mail address" message.

Do those who post such messages think that the entire group will benefit from reading them, or are they unaware of the fact that their response went to the entire group rather than just to one individual? More research might help to answer that question.

Does anybody know . . .?

This category ranked third in the tabulation with 55 occurrences, which indicates that many times when someone sought help from the subscribers to HSJOURN. Some requests asked for information about workshops, and some sought help with computer software or hardware, for example.

Future research might investigate how well those who asked questions were satisfied with the responses they received. Research might also probe whether those posting questions received direct responses in addition to any that were posted to the group.

Consumer information

Computers and related items seemed to figure frequently in these kinds of messages. Topics such as how much computer memory was needed for certain functions and whether newer software would work properly with older systems were prominent. Comments about sources of journalism curriculum materials also appeared.

Additional research might study in more detail the types of products or services about which people shared information.

Possible directions for future research

Certainly, content analysis on this topic can be continued. Researchers working on future projects, however, might want to refine the categories used in this initial effort.

It is likely that in the future more people will join and use HSJOURN. Future content analysis research, therefore, should have a larger amount of data at its disposal. Availability of archived messages from the server will allow for statistical comparison on a year-to-year basis.

Survey research might also be used to study some aspects of the operation of HSJOURN. Subscribers could be contacted to determine why and how they use HSJOURN and what benefits they derive from it. Such surveys could be conducted electronically using the subscriber's E-mail address as shown in a list of subscribers available from the server.

Another direction for study would be to compare use of HSJOURN with use of some other discussion groups. Even this preliminary study indicated some noticeable differences between messages on HSJOURN and those on discussion groups and bulletin boards cited in the literature.

More valuable comparisons might be made with discussion groups such as CMA-L, which is a list for advisers and others interested in student publications at the college level, and JOURNET, which is a list for journalism educators and professional journalists.

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